

# RETAIN

You've always had the power, my dear.

You just had to learn it for yourself.

The Wizard of Oz

Retain is a word steeped in meaning. It can mean *to keep* or *continue to have something*. To *stay safe and secure*. To *remember*. All of these definitions contain the essence of what it means to retain Adult Foundational Learners, or said another way, for learners to “keep on keeping on”. To continue on a journey of

## TEST THIS OUT!

### A Mindset Practice to Try!

When you are learning something new or come up against a challenge, **use the word “YET”**. For example, “*I don't know how to do this kind of math YET.*” “*I don't know how to create an essay YET.*” Adding the word “YET” to your language is a way to practice a growth mindset and change your thinking!

growth and learning, there needs to be elements of safety, even as we risk and move forward into the unknown. Trust in ourselves, trust in the process, and trusting those around us gives us courage to continue to step towards the bigger versions of ourselves. Remembering who we've become and what we've done is fuel for this journey; powerful enough to change our beliefs about ourselves, what we are capable of, and what is possible *now*.

So the greatest threshold to an awakened life is the courage to say yes. Not yes to what others dream for you or to being abused or mistreated, but yes to the challenge to live your own life, vulnerably and directly.

Mark Nepo,  
2016, p. 156

So what is helpful for our perseverance? What are the practices that help us to continue to say YES despite challenges? Having a growth mindset is one of them.

Growth mindset is a concept that Positive Psychologist Carol Dweck<sup>6</sup> developed after studying learners' attitudes towards success and failure.

<sup>6</sup> Dweck, C. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York: Random House.

Learners who have fixed mindsets avoid challenges. They give up easily in the face of obstacles. They see effort as pointless and feel threatened by other's success. Feedback is ignored and is seen as threatening.

Learners with growth mindsets, on the other hand, embrace challenges. They persist in the face of setbacks and seek to learn from feedback. They see their effort as the path to success and mastery. They are inspired by other's successes and glean valuable lessons from them.

A growth mindset can be learned! One could speculate that many of the Adult Foundational Learners who have made it through to the completion of their class or courses are practicing it on a regular basis. Carol Dweck research points to this: "Your capacity to stay with and eventually triumph when things get hard is less about innate ability and more about whether you believe success comes from talent or effort. If you believe that success comes from some innate gift, something you either have or don't have, you often end up faring worse. You're more likely to back away and make excuses when things get hard....If, on the other hand, you believe that success is more about effort than talent, when those same difficult moments arrive, you take a different approach. You see them as opportunities to grow. Your job is to figure out how to embrace the trial, continue to work hard, explore new ways of moving through it, and ask for help from teachers, mentors, and guides."<sup>7</sup>

Courage does not always roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying, "I will try again tomorrow."

Mary Anne Radmacher, Author

Another practice that is helpful for developing our perseverance is GRIT. Grit is a combination of our passion and our perseverance, our ability to stay loyal to our goals, to work hard and to keep going in the face of setbacks. The Positive Psychology Researcher and Author who brought this concept to current culture is Angela Duckworth. In her book GRIT<sup>8</sup>, she explores that the secret to outstanding achievement is not talent but the blend of sticking with something that you love, even if

There's nothing wrong with mastering any skill or accomplishing any task, as long as that mastery or accomplishment is born of our love, as long as we can remember it is we who are being created and shaped by our immense effort. What we often perceive as failure is an unexpected opening in our lives. Nothing is wasted. Sometimes the map we work so hard to chart and follow needs to be burned in order for us to live our own life.

Mark Nepo, 2016, p. 75

<sup>7</sup>Fields, J. (2016). *How to live a good life*. New York: Hay House. (citing Carol Dweck's work, p. 89).

<sup>8</sup> Duckworth, A. (2016). *GRIT: the power of passion and perseverance*. Toronto. Harper Collins.

it means it takes a long time, there are failures, and it requires great effort.

Key aspects of grit are:

- **Interest** (finding something you love or enjoy),
- **Practice** (devoting yourself to focus on it and commit to it),
- **Purpose** (your WHY), and
- **Hope** (continuing to keep going even when you get knocked down).

As she says in her book: “One form of perseverance is the daily discipline of trying to do things better than we did yesterday.”<sup>9</sup> Again, this would seem to be a practice for the learning community, both participants and CALP staff. As one learner put it, “*The teachers never gave up on anyone in the program. They always looked for another way to teach or reach them*”. Another learner shared: “*Now I feel more comfortable reading to my kids. It’s something we can do together. I still struggle with some things but I know I will get it eventually. I don’t give up as easily on things that are hard for me.*”

## Strategies to Retain Learners

The Gathering to Learn project learned a lot about what makes participants stay involved and engaged. Our CALP community pointed us to three key areas that are elements of retention, learners persisting and what makes a difference.

- **Changes to the Learner**
- **Gaining Something from the Learning**
- **There is Help for their Barriers** (see What Might Get in the Way, p. 60 and Recipe for Hope, p. 64)

### Changes to the Learner

One of the main areas that changes in a participant from the beginning of the learning journey to when they are “all in” is their belief in themselves and their identity. They have new storylines about their learning, their education, their abilities, and their potential. They realize they are smart! Their self-talk changes from “I can’t” to “I can”. They feel a

I am a totally different person now because of getting my GED. I am not as shy, I feel more confident. I have my Driver’s License now and have left an abusive relationship. I am able to make it on my own and keep my kids safe. I can apply for jobs that I could not have before.

Participant

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<sup>9</sup> Duckworth, A. (2016). p. 91

sense of pride for what they have gone through or, in the keeping with the nature of being “gritty”, – “survived.”

One CALP Facilitator shared his experiences with a participant’s changes in identity by saying, “He sees himself as a leader, not a broken man.” Another CALP staff shared, “Their desire to improve their lives is greater than their previous learning fears.” Both of these examples point to powerful changes in identity and belief in oneself.

Another thing that happens is that the participant feels free to be themselves; they no longer fear judgement. This is when the energy and effort put into building connections and community pays off: participants have a sense of confidence and a sense of belonging. Both influence the other.

I kept coming back because I felt that the women were open and that I could trust them. I started to make friends in the group and looked forward to being with everyone each week. I like how if you are having a bad day, you do not have to say anything and people do not judge you for it. I have been coming for 3 - 4 years now.

Participant

### Gaining Something from the Learning

Participants also experience many benefits from the learning journey. The key quality to these benefits is **relevance**. For some, it may be that they are using what they learned in a real life situation. One participant shared that as she gained a better understanding of her own

I am more confident to talk to people I don’t know or who are different from me. I can open up to people. I am learning to better understand my surroundings and this is helping me with my anxiety.

Participant

emotions, it also helped her understand the emotions of her son – she now realizes that all emotions are okay – his and her own! Other participants shared that they learned tangible skills that helped them in life, like math or how to write an essay. Another group member shared it was valuable to her that she could relax in the learning environment and learn *how she needed to learn*.

Another benefit that came forward from the research was that participants gained relationships that were important to them and as a result, gained trust. People made friends and they formed communities. Sometimes coming to one group led that person to other learning opportunities and more social connections. For some, the value in the relationships came from feeling significant and known. As one CALP staff put it: *“The relationship makes them stay.”*

In response to being asked *“What kept you coming back?”* one participant replied, *“I like that I can talk to others that are different from me. I like the acceptance and welcome of the group. I like the location in the community.”* Another responded to this question by saying, *“I liked getting to know different people and that we got to talk about meaningful things. It was an opportunity to be ‘real’.”*

Participants also valued the invitation and space to share with others – they liked being asked for their input and they liked sharing their learning with others. They liked doing culturally relevant activities. They valued being invited to do something fun – to laugh, play and try new experiences through different learning activities.

Last, as a result of the invitation, the community, and the relevance of the learning, they kept coming back! Their learning path became part of their routine and consequently, a habit, even when it was hard. One CALP staff shared a story of an Adult Foundational Learner that had a job, plus a farm, two children and a wife, and he still persisted with his learning goal of learning to read. His wife kept asking him to read her another story, and this was the fuel he used to persist in his learning.

*So come to the pond, or the river of your imagination,  
or the harbor of your longing  
And put your lips to the world  
And live your life.*

Mary Oliver, Poet

## The Million Dollar Question!

We asked CALP staff **“Can you predict who will stay?”** The most frequent answer we received was “Maybe”. “No”. “Sometimes.”!

The most concrete data we could gather from this question was that if you have a relationship with the learners you may be able to predict who will stay. If you see inner confidence growing in a person and they are making progress or having success, you might be able to predict that they will stay all the way through.

That said, sometimes we are simply wrong in our assumptions. A learner who has been quiet and introverted may be the mystery that follows all the way through. Someone who was engaged and committed may have life circumstances that all of a sudden alter their life course.



CALP staff were asked to reflect on their experiences with learners who were sporadic or didn't remain engaged. They shared that people who had not managed their addictions or transience may stop attending or following through. Other factors that contributed to retention occurred when the choice or decision to attend the group wasn't their own (they are mandated to come or they are being pressured to come). Sometimes it was just not the right time or the right fit.

Unfortunately, for some, the learning community can be a deterrent. If people are feeling left out, if there is comparison or cliques, if there are unresolved conflicts or poor interactions between participants, the will and courage to attend may simply stop.

## What Might Get in the Way? (Participant Barriers and Challenges)

Adult Foundational Learners were asked a similar question: **“What kinds of things would make you leave and not return? What might have happened in your life?”**

Overwhelmingly, the most popular answers:

- **If they felt judged or embarrassed in class**
- **Not feeling heard or seen**
- **Lack of trust**
- **Not making a connection** to the people would keep people away

Other barriers learners shared clustered around things related to **life circumstances**. If they didn't have childminding, had to return to work or if the program wasn't affordable or free, they would have difficulty continuing their learning. Mobility, health and transportation issues also weighed in on their decisions and ability to continue on.

There were several comments made about the **learning environment and staff**. A learner shared that she would not return *"if the teacher's heart is not at work or if the teacher was negative"*. Lack of meaningful discussion was also a trigger for not wanting to continue. Learners also shared that if there was gossiping outside the group or if people were not respecting the rules or group guidelines, they would not be motivated to stay.

*Equally....*

What Gets in the Way? (For CALP Staff, Administration and Funding Sources)

We asked CALP staff a similar question, specifically **"What limitations or challenges do you face in retaining your learners?"**

Challenges fell into four categories:

- **Lack of Funding**
- **Staff**
- **Organization**
- **Community challenges**



### Lack of Funding

CALP staff **lack funding** for the very things that make the difference for Adult Foundational Learners. Some CALP groups are not funded in ways that allow them to provide childminding, food, refreshments, or transportation assistance. They are not funded for the important ‘front-loading’ of relationship building, including one-to-one visits, home visits or follow-up visits. They also face issues related to rental and building costs.

The CALP 2020 guidelines state that learners must pay fees so long as they are able to afford them. “Grant funds can only be used to reduce fees for learners that demonstrate a financial need. Fees may cover partial or all costs, or even generate revenue above delivery costs. Grant recipients must collect fees for all programs and services with the exception of learning opportunities offered through the tutoring mode of delivery. Nonetheless, finances should not be an obstacle to learning, and fees must be reduced or eliminated for learners with financial barriers. To ensure access for learners with a financial barrier, organizations must have an effective policy in place to reduce fees.” (p. 18)

### Staffing Challenges

**Staffing challenges** are also an issue that gets in the way. It’s difficult to find the right facilitators. As evidenced all throughout the research, staff’s ability to be person-centered, authentic, vulnerable, present and responsive are just some of the qualities that make a difference for Adult Foundational Learners. Add to that a good dose of flexibility, resourcefulness, creativity and perseverance and you may have the beginnings of a CALP staff profile. The soft skills needed to build relationship with learners with a variety of contexts is not to be underestimated. Added to this, some CALPs must serve a large geographical area with a very small staff team (sometimes just one person!). This also brings a lack of anonymity to CALP staff – if they are “the one Facilitator” in a small town, community or area, their own privacy is compromised.



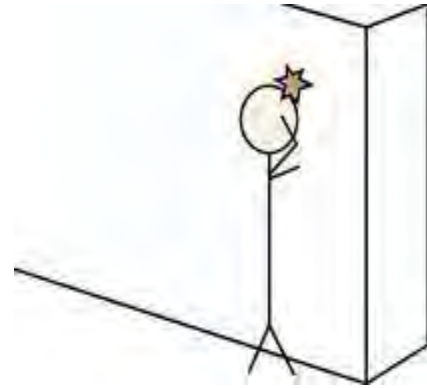


## Organizations

There are lots of issues related to organizations. Some of them are struggling with lack of space. Location can also be a challenge – it may be inadequate, hard to find, or hard to get to. Some are limited in only providing daytime hours. Sometimes the issues are more complex. CALP staff shared that sometimes there are competing funders within one project – how do you satisfy all needs and remain centered on your vision? Other times, there is a lack of sharing within the organization – a classic case of one hand not knowing what the other hand is doing. Last, philosophies of how to do the work can be competing – some staff or CALP groups are very neighbourhood focused and others operate as large institutions and businesses. Where is the common ground?

## Community Challenges

Community challenges round out the areas of challenge for CALP staff. As mentioned, in some cases, there is a small staff team serving a large geographic area. In other situations, there is a very small population – this brings its own issues with anonymity, community building and incentives. For example, one CALP staff noted that in their particular community, there are historical family patterns of not valuing education. The attitude is “What do you need to do that for? Just go work at the plant.”



## A Recipe for HOPE!

One of the questions that quickly became our favorite was one that was posed to participants. We asked them: ***“If you could give us a recipe for what would make people keep coming back to a group like this, what would that be?”*** \*Please note, this recipe can be doubled and shared!



- Start with good preparation! Put the coffee/tea pot on! Create the atmosphere! Put out snacks. Help us not to worry about things like childminding, transportation, and being hungry.
- Have the right ingredients before you even start! Hire people who care about us and take the time to understand what we bring with us. The special combination of patient, calm, present, caring, authentic, encouraging, enthusiastic staff are KEY ingredients to making this recipe work for us.
- Don't forget that the container matters too! Make it easy for us to get to you. Give us the materials that we need to learn and have the container fit our needs. This is not one size fits all – some of us will need structure, some of us will need free-form containers. Some of us will mix well with other ingredients right away. Some will need a long, slow immersion...
- The little touches make the difference. Remember my name. Laugh with me. Make me laugh. Ask me questions. Find out my interests and what adds 'spice' to my life.
- What really holds this recipe together is connection. Accept me for who I am in all the stories I live through. Help me find my common humanity with others and compassion for myself. Don't discard my struggles for fear they will change the flavor – let me add them and integrate them into the taste of what we are creating together.
- Take the time to mix all these things together. Taste as you go along and feel free to add unlimited amounts of belief and care.
- Enjoy and celebrate whatever we end up with – **this is what courage tastes like.**

# RETAIN TOOLKIT

Retention is one of the most difficult aspects of our work. If you are wanting to learn more about how to retain Adult Foundational Learners to your program, these additional resources may be of specific interest to you. These resources follow the main themes that CALP staff shared for this stage of the learning journey. This toolkit gives you a “taste” of the concept or idea. The links and resources follow each topic in the toolkit.

## GRIT:

Psychologist and researcher Angela Duckworth defines “Grit” as “passion and perseverance for long term goals.” In other words, Grit involves taking the lessons you have learned through successes and failures and putting them to work for you for future accomplishments. It involves a “stick-to-it-ness” regardless of surrounding circumstances or other people’s opinions and believing that failure is not a fixed or an unchangeable rule.

Grit paired with the concept of Growth Mindset creates an understanding that failure does not define your character. Who you are is, instead, defined by how you evolve and learn from that failure. Courage, conscientiousness, perseverance, resilience, and passion are strong indicators at how “gritty” you are.

Thankfully, grit can be learned and there are concrete ways a person can become more “gritty”. It grows through practice and *practices*. It’s about believing you can change and that success is learning, falling down, and getting back up again. In many ways, it’s both about the “end game” as well as the day-to-day moments of choice we make as we move towards a goal.

## Resources for GRIT:

- Duckworth, A. (2016). *GRIT: the power of passion and perseverance*. Toronto: Harper Collins.
- Book: Dweck, C. (2006). *Mindset: the new psychology of success*. New York: Random House.
  - Carol Dweck: Mindset Works: <https://www.mindsetworks.com/science/>
- Book: Duckworth, A. (2016). *GRIT: the power of passion and perseverance*. Toronto: Harper Collins.

- [https://www.ted.com/talks/angela\\_lee\\_duckworth\\_grit\\_the\\_power\\_of\\_passion\\_and\\_perseverance?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/angela_lee_duckworth_grit_the_power_of_passion_and_perseverance?language=en)
- Grit Questionnaire: <https://angeladuckworth.com/grit-scale/>
- 5 Characteristics of Grit: <https://www.sacap.edu.za/blog/psychology/what-is-grit/>

### Natural Supports:

Natural supports are the personal relationships in an individual's life. As these do not include paid support, natural supports may be made up of family, friends, co-workers, peers, members in the same community, and almost anyone else that crosses the individual's path in a relational or organic setting. It comes from the idea of belonging which encompasses inclusivity, acceptance, and recognition of the individual where the relationships are built with each other, not for each other. Reciprocity and mutual exchange are pivotal components of these relationships.

As we change and grow, so do our natural supports. There are relationships that create life-long bonds and interconnection. There are also those relationships that are seasonal, established and formed for short-term support. In whatever case that these relationships are developed, no two friendships will be the same in conversation, capacity, support, and exchange. Natural supports can be an important resource for people to cultivate in all stages of a learner's pathway.

### Resources for Natural Supports:

- How to develop natural supports: [https://www.dds.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Publications\\_NaturalSupport\\_20190318.pdf](https://www.dds.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Publications_NaturalSupport_20190318.pdf)
- Natural Supports (Video): [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMe\\_5ERYWzk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMe_5ERYWzk)
- Natural Supports framework (Video): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ng1vNJ9xsJg>

### The Power of Habits and Tendencies:

Researcher Gretchen Rubin introduced the public to the idea of human habits and tendencies. Her framework introduced four approaches based on how we respond to expectations made by others and by ourselves.

*Upholders* are people who have no problem meeting expectations put on them from outer or inner voices. *Questioners* are those who require the expectations to make sense. They have to know why the expectation needs to be performed and they need to be able to endorse it.

*Obligers* are people who look to please others who will meet the expectations of others (sometimes at the expense of their own happiness and expectations). Finally, *Rebels* are driven by their own expectations and needs.

Being able to understand one's tendency, and the tendencies of those around us will help us understand people's unique tendencies and motivations, which in turn, gives us insight to support learners and staff more effectively and authentically.

### Resources for the Power of Habits and Tendencies:

- Book: Rubin, G. (2017). *The four tendencies: the indispensable personality profiles that reveal how to make your life better (and other people's lives better too)*. New York: Penguin Random House.
- Video with Gretchen Rubin:
  - Gretchen Rubin: Habits: Strategy of the Four Tendencies: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LIgvEOVT9OE>
- Gretchen Rubin's 4 Tendencies quiz: <https://quiz.gretchenrubin.com/>
- Gretchen Rubin's: The habits we most want to foster: <https://gretchenrubin.com/2014/02/the-habits-we-most-want-to-foster-or-the-essential-seven/>

### Relational Dynamics:

Human interaction is pivotal for health and wellness. How we interact with self and others; how we develop, build, and grow relationships are integral in how we walk in everyday life. These interactions are what fuel or influence our relationships.

It is important to note that communication and conflict resolution are essential skills while cultivating these healthy relationships. Holding space – being present in mind and body and actively listening – creates an atmosphere of compassion. Using **meta-communication** or being able to convey messages so that the receiver can fully comprehend the significance and emotion behind the messages, is crucial to the authenticity of the interaction. Relational dynamics is about being able to hold many elements of communication at the same time – yours, mine, and ours. Within these elements, it is natural for conflict or miscommunication to arise as no two people think or feel exactly alike. Having strategies to communicate with compassion, vulnerability and presence will serve to build relational dynamics, instead of building relational walls. The following resources are just some of the tools that can support you with this!

### Resources for Relational Dynamics:

- **Metacommunication** (Video): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RgeH75UWLJY>
- **Metacommunication**: <https://diana-jones.com/metacommunication/>

- TED talk (Video) Rodolfo Young: The Art of Holding Space: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1eTWew9zbAs>
- How to hold space for someone: <https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/11-things-that-will-help-you-hold-space-for-someone-0523175>
- What are relationship dynamics: <https://drdenisenadler.com/what-are-relationship-dynamics/>
- Conflict Resolution (Video): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DSGy5yvC0hM>
- 11 Ways you can better resolve conflicts: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2017/11/14/11-ways-you-can-better-handle-conflict-resolution/#6fbcd5832854>

## RETAIN Checklist

These are the broad themes, suggestions and practices that have come from our CALP community related to the RETAIN aspect of the Learning Pathway.



**The following checklist can serve several purposes for you. It can provide you with:**

- ✓ A quick assessment of the different elements that can keep people coming and committed to their learning goals
- ✓ A tailored strategy of things to try out, change, tweak or consider
- ✓ A regular review of your progress
- ✓ A conversation tool to use in your team or network to assess priorities

Areas to Consider	Yes	No	Not possible	Let's do this!	Priority rating
<b>GAINING SOMETHING FROM IT!</b>					
Do you consistently provide support for people's potential barriers and life circumstances? (think: childminding, food, transportation needs, learning needs)					
Do you consistently communicate belief in their abilities?					
Do you see participants experiencing a sense of belonging?					
Do you see participants changing the way they see or talk about themselves?					
Do you see participants encouraging each other?					
Do you see participants caring about each other and taking care of each other?					
Do you see this learning experience becoming part of their life/routine?					
Do you see participants having fun?					
Do you remain curious and engaged in what is important to the participant or learning community? (HOW?)					
Do you see participants using their knowledge and skills in their day to day life?					
Do you hear participants talking about next steps for their lives or their learning?					

Areas to Consider	Yes	No	Not possible	Let's do this!	Priority rating
Do you see participants joining other learning activities?					
Do you see participants referring other people to your program or course?					
<b>A WAY IN</b>					
Do you have ways for participants who didn't complete to come back or join in again?					
Is the process easy for past or present participants to return?					
Do you have ways to work with a participant's barriers so that they can remain engaged? (i.e. tutoring, helping with fees or costs, childminding, etc.)					
Do you check in with participants who have missed one or two sessions?					
Do you check in with participants who didn't complete?					
Do you provide assurances and encouragement of a participant's strengths?					
Do you acknowledge small steps of confidence and trying new things? (HOW?)					
Do you ask people what they need?					
Are there ways for you to engage a participant's support network or natural supports if they are struggling?					
Are there ways for participants to define success on their terms?					
Do you communicate the barriers participants face to your funding source?					
Do you communicate the barriers you face as CALP staff to your funding source?					



Do you hire people who have the heart, the mind and the presence for this work? (What is important to you?)					
<b>Areas to Consider</b>	Yes	No	Not possible	Let's do this!	Priority rating
Do you as a team or staff regularly encourage, recognize and ignite each other in this work? (HOW?)					

Your Notes: \_\_\_\_\_